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Educating Educators to Optimize their School Facility for Teaching and Learning

By [Jeffrey Lackney, PhD, AIA](#)

What is Educational Commissioning™?

Educational Commissioning™ is a new concept in school planning that refers to a process through which teachers, students and even parents and community partners are educated as to the design intent of a newly constructed school facility. The objective of educational commissioning is to provide all occupants with the necessary knowledge to use the school facility as optimally as possible for teaching and learning.

Educational commissioning with educators starts well before pre-design, informs architectural programming, extends through facility planning, design, and construction, includes post-occupancy evaluation, and extends well into the occupancy of the building including professional development. In essence, educational commissioning is a new and unique model for research, action and training that encompasses and parallels the entire building delivery process as a means of embedding curriculum development, as well as, providing a framework for training teachers to use the school building as a three-dimensional textbook.



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The concept of Educational Commissioning™ follows the concept of “building commissioning” developed by the building industry. Most buildings never go through a quality assurance process and perform well below their potential performance. Building commissioning was invented as a systematic process that assures a building performs in accordance with the stated design intent and the owner’s operational needs—before occupancy. The building industry, in turn, took the metaphor of commissioning from the U.S. Navy, who commission their ships—they take them out for a test drive—subjecting them to a battery of tests so that they do not fail when they are finally subject to the high seas. The idea of Educational Commissioning™—taking a school building out for a test drive—then can be thought of as a process of training teachers and students to test the school building in action to support their intended educational program. Programs and projects can be planned as part of an action research project to test how well the building performs as an educational tool.

Why Educational Commissioning™?

Despite a highly collaborative community planning process where hundreds of community stakeholders may be involved in the design of a school building, once the building is finally constructed and occupied a year or more later, many occupants are unaware of the myriad of ways the school facility has been designed to support teaching and learning, or to act as a three-dimensional textbook. More often than not, occupants of schools, teachers, administrators and students alike use the school facility with a WYSIWYG mentality (‘What You See Is What You Get’), not realizing the full potential of the school facility for learning; recall the open classroom experiment of the 1960s and 1970s to illustrate what happens when teachers are not trained to use the new learning environment as designed. Without educational commissioning, we are apt to repeat this mistake of history. For a personal view of the open classroom movement see an [article](#) by the late Ezra Ehrenkrantz.

“Educational Commissioning™ is in essence taking a school building out for a test drive—a process of training teachers and students to test the school building in action to support education.”

Although educators readily admit the critical importance of the school facility in the educational process and its ability to help them function as professionals, the degree to which educators are able to use their learning environment for educational purposes varies considerably. Educational facility researchers such as Anne Taylor, Henry Sanoff, myself and others, have consistently found that regardless of improvements in classroom size, spatial configuration, physical features, furnishings or equipment, traditional patterns of direct instruction persist. This research finding is of critical significance in light of the design of new school facilities intended to support 21st century teaching and learning modalities such as project-based learning, cooperative learning, interdisciplinary instruction and other recent educational reforms. For a description of project-based learning see my recent [interview](#) with John Sole, and for a summary of educational reforms see an [article](#) written by [Prakash Nair](#).

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"Research indicates that...regardless of improvements in classroom size, spatial configuration, physical features, furnishings or equipment, traditional patterns of direct instruction persist."

School buildings are now being designed to be responsive to environmental conditions such as daylight through the use of sensors and automatic blinds, and natural ventilation through the use of the stack effect. School buildings and grounds are now being designed, as Anne Taylor calls "three-dimensional textbooks" ([article](#)).

Teachers and students need to be first aware and then understand how the school building operates to take full advantage of the benefits. Further, school facilities are increasingly being designed to support individualized instruction, project-based learning experiences, environmental education and other modes of learning. If teachers are not familiar with the design intent of say a shared resource area between classrooms, or an L-shaped classroom (for a description of the "Fat-L" classroom read Peter Lippman's [article](#) on the subject) they can and often do miss out on these valuable features designed to support their instruction and their students' learning.

The Methods of Educational Commissioning™

Educational commissioning can be conducted through a number of methods including a building walkthrough with architects, a half-day in-service teacher training to a full-day curriculum planning work session or a part of a participatory post-occupancy evaluation of the school building. The school administration may even consider community-wide public forums and workshops with business and community partners who may find themselves using the facility for a variety of programs.



The Benefits of Educational Commissioning™

Educational Commissioning™, that is, educating the learning community as a whole as to the operational intent of a new school design optimizes the full potential of a building for learning. By knowing more about the intent behind the design of their school, teachers, students, parents and community partners will gain a greater appreciation for the valuable asset they have in their community for effective teaching and learning. School leaders can take advantage of the increased awareness of the community toward their building when the time comes to invest additional resources in the upkeep, preventive maintenance of the facility to ensure their school is an effective supporter of the education process for years to come.

"Educating the learning community as a whole as to the operational intent of a new school design optimizes the full potential of a building for learning."

For more information about conducting educational commissioning seminars and workshops for your school district, contact Jeff Lackney at

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[Jeff Lackney](#) is a senior partner with [Fielding Nair International](#), an award-winning school planning and design firm that is dedicated to blending the disciplines of architecture and education through the advocacy of collaborative design and cooperative research.



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